Is Christ's Return Imminent?

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The New Testament is consistent in its anticipation that the return of Christ might occur at any moment. That pervading perspective of imminence prompts three questions. The first question pertains to whether the Tribulation will precede Christ's coming for the church. The answer to that question is that it will not because the church is never asked to look forward to the tribulation, but they are asked to look forward to Christ's coming. The second question revolves around how the return of Christ could have been imminent in the early church. The answer here is that no one but the Father knows when the coming will occur, so that Christians including the early church must always be ready. The third question asks why Christ's imminent return is so important. This answer relates to the motivation it supplies for believers to purify their lives and thereby progress toward the goal of sanctification and Christlikeness. The threefold call of the imminence doctrine is to wake up and obey right now, to throw off the works of darkness, and to put on the garments of holy living.

Christ could come at any moment. I believe that with all my heart—not because of what I read in the newspapers, but because of what I read in Scripture.

From the very earliest days of the church, the apostles and first-generation Christians nurtured an earnest expectation and fervent hope that Christ might suddenly return at any time to gather His church to heaven. James, writing what was probably the earliest of the New Testament epistles, expressly told his readers that the Lord's return was imminent:

Be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for *the coming of the Lord is at hand*. Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, *the Judge isstanding at the door!* (James 5:7–9, emphasis added).

Peter echoed that same expectation when he wrote, "The end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers" (1 Peter 4:7). The writer

of Hebrews cited the imminent return of Christ as a reason to remain faithful: "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24–25). He wrote, "Yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry" (v. 37). And the apostle John made the most confident pronouncement of all: "Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18). When John recorded his vision in the book of Revelation, he prefaced it by saying these things "must shortly take place" (Revelation 1:1).

The New Testament writers often wrote of Christ's "appearing," and they never failed to convey the sense that this could happen imminently. "And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (1 John 2:28; cf. 3:2; Colossians 3:4; 2 Timothy 4:8; 1 Peter 5:4).

All those texts suggest that in the early church expectation of Christ's imminent return ran high. A solid conviction that Christ could return at any time permeates the whole NT. When the apostle Paul described the Lord's coming for the church, he used personal pronouns that show he clearly was convinced he himself might be among those who would be caught up alive to meet the Lord: "*We* who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord . . . *we* who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17, emphasis added). He obviously looked for Christ to return in his lifetime. He furthermore made it plain that a watchful, hopeful expectancy about Christ's Second Coming is one of the godly attitudes divine grace teaches all believers: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, *looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*" (Titus 2:11–13, emphasis added).

Will the Tribulation Precede Christ's Coming for the Church?

Nonetheless, some students of Bible prophecy today insist Christians should not have any immediate expectation of Christ's return. Instead, they say, we should be looking for the beginning of the seven-year *Tribulation* period, the fulfillment of certain judgments and preliminary signs, the rise of the Antichrist—or all of the above. When they talk about future things, the emphasis is heavily weighted

toward dread and disaster for the people of God. As far as they are concerned, “the blessed hope” becomes relevant only *after* the church has gone through the Tribulation.

At first glance, this position seems not altogether devoid of biblical support. After all, when Christ outlined the events of the last days, He included many prophecies about tribulation and hardship, and He said these signs would precede and point to His return (Matthew 24:21, 30).

The epistles also contain prophecies about apostasy and persecution in the last days preceding Christ’s return. For example, the apostle Paul forewarned Timothy of perilous times that would come (2 Tim 3:1–3). He told the younger pastor, “The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith” (1 Tim 4:1)—and he went on to describe an apostasy that would precede and signify Christ’s return to earth.

Those who believe the church must suffer through the hardships of the Tribulation period invariably cite 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3 as proof:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first,* and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition (emphasis added).

So on the one hand, the NT is permeated with an eager sense of expectancy and conviction that the blessed hope of Christ’s return is imminent. On the other hand, we are warned about trouble and affliction that will precede Christ’s return. How can we reconcile these two threads of prophecy? How can we cultivate a daily expectation of Christ’s return if these preliminary signs must yet be fulfilled before He returns?

Several points must be borne in mind. First, all the general “signs of the times” given in the NT *have* been fulfilled—and *are being* fulfilled before our eyes. They are, in fact, characteristics of the entire church age. Apostasy and unbelief, self-love and sin, wars, rumors of wars, and natural disasters have all been common throughout the church age. Practically every generation of Christians since the time of Christ has believed they were seeing the end-times signs fulfilled before their very eyes. So how are *we* to know whether our own time is the true “last days” of Bible prophecy—or just more of the same general apostasy and calamity

that have characterized the entire Christian era?

The apostle John settled that question under the Holy Spirit's inspiration when he wrote, "Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18). The church was *already* in "the last days" even before the apostolic era ended. In fact, "last days" is a biblical term for the Christian era itself (Hebrews 1:1–2). This entire age is a prelude to the final culmination of human history. These *are* the last days—and so was the early church era.

Second, nothing in the NT ever suggests we should defer our expectation of Christ's appearing until other preliminary events can occur. The one apparent exception is 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3 (quoted in full above), which says, "that Day [the day of the Lord] will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed." That is obviously a key text for those who believe the Tribulation is next on the prophetic agenda, and that the church should be expecting the reign of Antichrist rather than the return of Christ. Indeed, if 2 Thess 2:1–3 actually means Christ's coming for the church cannot occur until after seven years of Tribulation, it nullifies everything the New Testament teaches about the imminence of Christ's return.

But look carefully at the context of 2 Thessalonians 2. The Thessalonian Christians had been confused and upset by some false teachers (possibly people pretending to speak for the apostle) who were teaching that the persecutions and sufferings they were currently experiencing were the very judgments associated with *the day of the Lord.* (The expression always refers to judgment and usually to a time of apocalyptic judgment—cf. Isaiah 13:9–11; Amos 5:18–20; 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 6:17; 16:14.) Many in the Thessalonian church, in the midst of their own severe hardship and distress, had evidently believed that lie, and they believed it meant they themselves had become objects of God's final apocalyptic wrath. Obviously, they were deeply troubled by this, for in his earlier epistle, Paul had encouraged them by telling them of the *rapture* (1 Thessalonians 4:14–17)—the coming of Christ for his church. Paul had even instructed them to comfort one another with the promise of Christ's coming for them (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

But now, in a time of severe persecution and trial, the Christians at Thessalonica had fallen prey to the false idea that God was already pouring out His final wrath—and *they* were among the objects of that wrath. They obviously feared they had missed the rapture and were about to be swept away in the final and epochal

judgments of the Day of the Lord.

So Paul wrote, “Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come” (2 Thessalonians 2:1–2). “The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” is a clear reference to the *rapture.* “The day of Christ” is *the day of the Lord* (in fact, the older manuscripts use the expression “day of the Lord” in this verse).

There were two aspects of the error troubling the Thessalonian church: one was the notion that they had missed the rapture. The other was the accompanying fear that they had already entered into the apocalyptic judgment that signaled the day of the Lord had arrived already.

And so when Paul says, *“that Day* will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition” (2 Thess 2:3, emphasis added)—he is talking about the day of the Lord and its apocalyptic judgment, not the rapture. He was not suggesting that the coming of Christ for the church would be delayed until after the Tribulation events had all played out. He was certainly not suggesting that the Thessalonians should defer their hope of Christ’s coming for them until the end of the Tribulation. He had spent his entire first epistle urging them to be watchful and expectant and to encourage one another with the news of Christ’s imminent return (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:1–9; 4:15–18; 5:6, 9, 11). If the apostle now meant to teach them that all the events of the Tribulation must be fulfilled *before* Christ could return for them, that would be scant “comfort” indeed. In fact, it would overturn everything the NT has to say about Christ’s return being imminent, comforting, and hopeful.

So the consistent teaching of the NT is that Christians should be looking for the imminent coming of Christ for His church, and 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4 is no exception.

How Could Christ’s Coming Have Been Imminent in the Early Church?

Some argue that Christ’s coming could not possibly have been imminent for the early church, given the obvious fact that two thousand years later, He has still not returned. Skeptics often ridicule Christianity or challenge the inerrancy of Scripture on that very ground. After all, the verses cited at the beginning of this chapter do prove that James, Peter, John, Paul, and the writer of Hebrews all

believed Christ's return was very near—"at the door" (James 5:9); "at hand" (Philippians 4:5; 1 Peter 4:7); "approaching" (Hebrews 10:25); "com[ing] quickly" (Revelation 3:11; 22:7).

How can it be, then, that two thousand years later Christ still has not returned? Could the apostles have been in error about the timing? That is precisely what some skeptics claim. Here's a typical excerpt from a newsletter whose sole aim is to attack the inerrancy of Scripture:

Paul, himself, showed . . . that he was among those who awaited the imminent return of Christ. Yet, as the history of that era clearly shows, all was for nought. No messiah appeared . . . The NT repeatedly says the messiah was to return in a very short time. Yet, mankind has waited for nearly 2, 000 years and nothing has occurred. By no stretch of the imagination can that be considered "coming quickly." . . . It is, indeed, unfortunate that millions of people still cling to the forlorn hope that somehow a messiah will arise to extract them from their predicament. How many years (2,000, 10,000, 100,000) will it take for them to finally say, "We can only conclude that we are the victims of a cruel hoax"?

What shall we make of this charge against the truthfulness of Scripture? Does the passing of two thousand years indeed prove that Christ's coming was not imminent in the early church era, and that the apostles were mistaken?

Certainly not. Remember the clear statement of Christ in Matthew 24:42: "You do not know what hour your Lord is coming." The exact time remains hidden from us, as it was from the apostles. But Christ could nonetheless come at any time. The Judge is still at the door. The day is still at hand. There are no other events that must occur on the prophetic calendar before Christ comes to meet us in the air. He could come at any moment. And it is in *that* sense that Christ's coming is imminent. In the very same sense, His coming was imminent even in the days of the early church.

I suppose it is *also* possible that Christ could delay his coming another two thousand years or longer. Given the rapid decline of society, I do not see how that is possible, but neither did the apostles when they surveyed the state of the world in their time. He still *could* delay His coming. That is why Christ taught us to be prepared, whether He comes immediately or delays longer than we think possible (cf. Matthew 24:42–25:12).

In any case, the passing of two thousand years is no reproach whatsoever against

the faithfulness of God or the trustworthiness of His Word. This is precisely the point Peter made when he anticipated the scoffers who would arise, mocking the promise of Christ's return (2 Peter 3:3–4). Peter's reply to those scoffers? "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). The amount of earthly time that passes is of no consequence. It is certainly irrelevant from God's timeless point of view. A moment is like many eons in His mind, and eons pass like moments. He is not bound by time as we are, and no amount of time can ever nullify His faithfulness. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

In other words, the real reason for the Lord's delay is not that He is negligent or careless in fulfilling his promises, but simply because He is longsuffering and kind, delaying Christ's coming and the wrath that will accompany it while he calls out people to salvation. And Christ will not return before the merciful purposes of God are complete. Far from suggesting apathy or neglect on God's part, the long delay before Christ's appearing simply underscores the remarkable depth of His nearly inexhaustible mercy and longsuffering.

And therefore the fact that two-thousand years have elapsed is utterly irrelevant to the doctrine of Christ's imminent return. Christ's coming is *still* imminent. It could occur at any moment. The command to be ready and watchful is as applicable to us as it was to the early church. In fact, the return of Christ should be an even *more* urgent issue for us, because it is drawing nearer with the passing of each day. We still do not know *when* Christ is coming, but we do know that we are two thousand years closer to that event than James was in those earliest days of the Christian era, when the Holy Spirit moved him to warn the church that the coming of the Lord was at hand and the Judge was already standing at the door.

Why Is Christ's Imminent Return So Important?

Why is it so important to believe that Christ could come at any moment? Because the hope of Christ's imminent coming has a powerful sanctifying and purifying effect on us. "Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3). The knowledge that Christ's coming is drawing closer should motivate us to prepare, to pursue Christlikeness, and to put off all the things that pertain to our former lives without Christ.

The apostle Paul took this very line of argument near the end of his epistle to the Romans. He reminded the believers at Rome of their duty to love their neighbors

as themselves, saying love is the one principle that fulfills all God's moral commands (Romans 13:8–10). Then stressing the urgency of living in obedience to this Great Commandment, he wrote,

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for *now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.* The night is far spent, *the day is at hand.* Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts (Romans 13:11–14).

That is the apostle Paul's wake-up call to the church. Christ's return is approaching. The time now is nearer than when we first believed. Every moment that passes brings Christ's return even closer. How are we to redeem the time? He calls for a three-part response that perfectly sums up the Christian's proper perspective on the imminent possibility of Christ's return.

Wake up! "Awake out of sleep," he pleads (Romans 13:11)—and he underscores both the urgency of this command and the imminency of Christ's return, with four phrases: "now it is high time"; "our salvation is nearer" (Romans 13:11); "The night is far spent"; and "the day is at hand" (Romans 13:12). Time is short; opportunity is fleeting. The Lord is coming soon, and the event draws nearer every moment. The time to obey is now. The only time we can take for granted is now. And since there is no guarantee of *more* time, it is unconscionable to defer our obedience.

Consider this: The apostle Paul was stressing the urgency of this commandment in *his* day, two thousand years ago. He believed the coming of Christ was near—and getting nearer by the moment. How much *more* urgent are these things for our time? "Now our salvation is nearer" (Romans 13:11)—two thousand years nearer, to be precise. Now is certainly not the time to let down our guard or fall asleep. Although some might be tempted to think the long delay means Christ's coming is no longer an urgent matter, a moment's thought will reveal that if we believe Christ was speaking the truth when He promised to come again quickly, we *must* believe that the time is drawing nearer by the moment—and the urgency is not lessened by the delay, but heightened.

It is perfectly natural for infidels, skeptics, and unbelievers to think Christ's delay means He will not fulfill His promise (2 Peter 3:4). But no genuine believer should

ever think that way. Rather than despairing because He tarries, we ought to realize that the time is nearer now than it has ever been. He *is* coming. As we saw earlier, His Word guarantees that He will come. Our hope should be growing stronger, not diminishing, as He delays his coming.

When Paul writes, “And do this, knowing the time” (Romans 13:11), he employs a Greek word for “time” *(kairos),* that speaks of an age or an era, not the time *(chronos)* told by a clock. “Knowing the time” therefore speaks of understanding this age, being discerning, like “the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). Christ rebuked the Pharisees for lacking this same kind of discernment: “When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red’; and in the morning, ‘It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times *[kairos]*” (Matthew 16:1–3).

Perhaps Paul had seen signs of spiritual lethargy or dullness among the believers at Rome. No doubt life in that great city held many distractions and earthly enticements that drew hearts away from the earnest hope of Christ’s appearing. Like the society in which we live, Roman life catered to the flesh, offering many material comforts and earthly amusements. Perhaps they were inclined to forget they were living in the last days. Spiritually, they were falling asleep.

It sometimes seems as if the entire church today is in an even worse state of spiritual drowsiness. There is widespread indifference concerning the Lord’s return. Where is the sense of expectation that characterized the early church? The sad legacy history will record about the church of our generation is that as we neared the dawn of a new millennium, most Christians were far more concerned about the arrival of a computer glitch known as the “millennium bug” than they were with the arrival of the millennial King!

Too many Christians in our time have settled into a state of insensate lethargy and inactivity—an unresponsiveness to the things of God. They are like Jonah, fast asleep in the hold of the ship while raging storms threaten to sweep us away (Jonah 1:5–6). They are like the foolish virgins, who “while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept” (Matthew 25:5). It is high time to awake from that slumber.

Paul sent a similar wake-up call to the church at Ephesus: “‘Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’ See then that you walk

circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:14–16). Never was such an alarm more needed than today. In the words of our Lord Himself, "Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming; in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning; lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping" (Mark 13:35–36).

When Paul says "our salvation is nearer than when we first believed" (Romans 13:11)—he is speaking, of course, about the *consummation* of our salvation. He was not suggesting that the Romans were unregenerate. He was not telling them their *justification* was a yet-future reality. He was reminding them that the culmination of what began at their regeneration was drawing closer by the moment. "Salvation" in this context refers to our *glorification,* the final goal of God's saving work (Rom 8:30). Throughout Scripture, this is connected with the appearing of Christ: "We know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him" (1 John 3:2). We "eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body" (Phil 3:20–21). "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:4). "He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation" (Heb 9:28). Notice that the writer of Hebrews employs the word *salvation* the same way Paul uses it in Romans 13:11.

This final aspect of salvation is what Paul referred to a few chapters earlier, in Romans 8:23: "We ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body." That is the aspect of our salvation that is nearer than when we first believed, and it only awaits Christ's coming.

So Paul's penetrating appeal here in Romans 13 assumes that Christ's return is imminent. If another eschatalogical age *(kairos)*—especially the Tribulation—were going to occur prior to Christ's return for the church, Paul would have surely pointed to the onset of that era and urged the Romans to prepare for it. But far from warning them that a dark era of Tribulation was in their future, what he told them was virtually the opposite: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Romans 13:12). The *kairos* of persecution, hardship, and darkness was "far spent" (*prokopt_* in the Greek text—meaning "advancing quickly," or "being driven out"). Daylight—the final consummation of our salvation when Christ returns to take us to glory—is imminent.

We have no idea how much sand remains in the hourglass of human history. But we ought to realize that a lot of sand has passed through the hourglass since the

apostle Paul said the dawning of daylight was already at hand. How much more urgent is this wake-up call for the church today!

The nighttime of Satan's dominion will soon give way to the dawn of Christ's coming for His own. The apostle Paul used precisely the same imagery of darkness and dawn when he wrote to the Thessalonians:

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:1–9).

God did not appoint us to wrath. The day of wrath that shall come in the Tribulation is not what we are to be preparing for. The sudden appearing of Christ to take us to glory is our hope. Wake up! Be sober. Be alert. Your redemption draws near.

Throw off! The approaching of dawn means it is time for a change of garments: "Let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:12). Paul's imagery evokes the picture of a soldier who has spent the night in a drunken orgy. Still clad in the garments of his sin, he has fallen into a drunken sleep. But dawn is approaching, and now it is time to wake up, throw off the clothes of night, and put on the armor of light.

The Greek verb translated "cast off" was a term that spoke of being ejected or expelled forcefully. The Greek term is used only three other times in the New Testament, and in each case it speaks of excommunication from a synagogue (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). So the term carries the idea of renouncing and forsaking sin (or the unrepentant sinner) with vigor and conviction. Paul is calling for an act of repentance. He wants them to cast off—excommunicate, or break fellowship with—the "works of darkness." It is the same expression he uses in Ephesians 5:11: "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose

them."

Paul often employs the imagery of changing garments to describe the putting off of sin and the old man. "Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts" (Ephesians 4:22). "Put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds" (Colossians 3:8–9). Notice the twofold putting off: "you *have put off* the old man with his deeds"; but *keep putting off* "all these" works of darkness. The picture this evokes is that of Lazarus, raised from the dead, given new life, but still bound in old grave-clothes that still needed to be put off (cf. John 11:43–44).

Employing similar imagery, the writer of Hebrews urges believers to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). There he pictures the Christian like an athlete, stripped of all encumbrances and ready to run. There is much we must throw aside if we are to be prepared for the coming day. James sums it up succinctly: "lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness" (James 1:21). And Peter echoes the thought: "laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking" (1 Peter 2:1).

Put on! There's another aspect of being prepared for the Lord's appearing. We are not fully prepared for the dawn of the new day unless we have put on the appropriate attire: "put on the armor of light . . . put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:12, 14).

Again, the imagery is that of a soldier who had spent the night in drunken carousing. He had stumbled home and fallen asleep in clothes that were now wrinkled and befouled with the evidence of his reveling. Day was dawning. It was time to wake up, to cast off the old clothes, and to put on something clean and polished and battle-ready. "Armor" suggests warfare, and that is fitting. Though the return of Christ is imminent, that is no warrant to forsake the battle. Scripture never suggests that His people should sit on a hillside somewhere to await His coming.

In fact, between now and His coming, we are locked in a battle "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:11). The nearness of our Lord's return does not mitigate the seriousness of the battle. Now is not the time to slacken our diligence, but the opposite. We should engage the

battle with new vigor, knowing that the time is short. “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Ephesians 6:13).

In other words, we are not off-duty soldiers, free to carouse and indulge in the fleshly pleasures of night life. We are on duty, and our Commander-in-Chief might appear at any moment. Therefore, “Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy” (Romans 13:13). The Christian who is not living a holy and obedient life with heavenly priorities is a Christian who does not grasp the significance of the Lord’s imminent return. If we genuinely are expecting our Lord to appear at any time, that blessed hope should move us to be faithful and walk properly, lest our Lord return to find us walking improperly, disobeying, or dishonoring Him. In Christ’s own words, “Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming; in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning; lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!” (Mark 13:35–37).

There’s more: “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Romans 13:14). Again, when we are glorified, we will be instantly conformed to the image of Christ—made as much like Him as it is possible for human beings to be. Christlikeness is therefore the goal toward which God is moving us (Rom 8:29). Even now, the process of sanctification should be conforming us to His image. As we grow in grace, we grow in Christlikeness. We are to become a reflection of Christ’s character and His holiness. And that is what Paul means when he writes, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” We are to pursue sanctification, to follow after Christ in our conduct and character, to let His mind be in us, and to let His example guide our walk (Philippians 2:5; 1 Peter 2:21).

Paul compared his pastoral duty of discipling the Galatians to birth pains, as he sought to bring them to Christlikeness: “I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19). Writing to the Corinthians He also described sanctification as the process by which they would be remade in Christ’s likeness: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). In other words, we progress from one level of glory to another as we progress toward the ultimate goal. So “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” is simply a command to pursue sanctification (the whole theme of Romans 12–16).

When Paul told the Galatians, “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27), he was in essence saying sanctification begins at conversion. From the first moment of faith, we are clothed in his righteousness. That is justification. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, My soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10).

But that is just the beginning of what it means to put on Christ. Justification is a once-for-all completed event, but sanctification is an ongoing process. And the command to “put on . . . Christ” in Romans 13 is a command to pursue the Christlikeness of sanctification.

The hope of Christ’s imminent return is therefore the hinge on which a proper understanding of sanctification turns.

Let’s review some of the key texts that speak of the imminence of Christ’s return, and notice specifically what kind of practical duties this doctrine places on us:

• *Steadfastness:* “Be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:8).

• *Kindness:* “Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!” (James 5:9).

• *Prayer:* “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers” (1 Peter 4:7).

• *Faithfulness in assembling together and encouraging one another:* “Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24–25).

• *Holy conduct and godliness:* “Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness” (2 Peter 3:11).

• *Purity and Christlikeness:* “When He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2–3).

Those cover several broad categories, embracing every aspect of our

sanctification. The hope of Christ's imminent return is a catalyst and an incentive for all these things—every fruit of the Spirit, every Christian virtue, everything that pertains to holiness and Christlikeness, and everything that belongs to life and godliness.

That is why it is so important to cultivate a watchful expectancy for the imminent coming of Christ. The point is not to make us obsessed with earthly events. In fact, if your interest in the return of Christ becomes a consuming fixation with what is happening in this world, you have utterly missed the point. The knowledge that Christ's return is imminent should turn our hearts heavenward, "from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:20).

"Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless" (2 Peter 3:14).

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture Quotations are from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

2. Dennis McKinsey, ed., "Imminence" in "Biblical Errancy," issue 89 (May 1990).

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